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ABSTRACT

This paper details how a Learning Circle model provided faculty in a multi-program graduate department of education with a vehicle to reflect on their teaching, research practices, and the structure and design of their graduate programs. Through participation in the Learning Circle, faculty met weekly to discuss a common series of readings which explored contemporary issues of social theory and educational practice. The conversations of the Learning Circle provided the impetus for the department to articulate a "pedagogy of possibility," which informed the development of an overarching conceptual framework to guide its newly revised teacher and counselor education programs. The paper highlights the process of the Learning Circle, provides a list of the readings that gave rise to the discussions, and identifies critical perspectives that advanced-level education programs must address in order to meet the needs of teachers and children in the 21st century. (Author/SM)

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Running Head: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PEDAGOGY

The Learning Circle Model: A Vehicle for Exploring Critical Perspectives in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This article details how a Learning Circle model provided faculty in a multi-program graduate department of education with a vehicle to reflect on their teaching, research practices, and the structure and design of their graduate programs. Through participation in the Learning Circle, faculty met weekly to discuss a common series of readings which explored contemporary issues of social theory and educational practice. The conversations of the Learning Circle provided the impetus for the department to articulate a "pedagogy of possibility", which informed the development of an overarching conceptual framework to guide its newly revised teacher and counselor education programs. The article highlights the process of the Learning Circle, provides a list of the readings that gave rise to the discussions, and identifies critical perspectives that advanced level education programs must address in order to meet the needs of teachers and children in the 21st Century.

The role of colleges and universities in the future must take an ever broader look at the multiple cultures, multiple voices, and multiple realities that living in the 21st century will involve.
(Ricardo Fernandez, President of Lehman College, 1994)

For colleges of teacher education, the above statement must serve as a charge for reflection on the current status of teacher education programs and how they must be transformed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Teacher educators must be prepared to ask important questions about how history, ideology, politics, biases, and power relations impact on how they think?; on what they teach?; on how they work together in the Academy?; and on how they work with prospective teachers, parents and local school district personnel to shape the course of education? With the advent of the standards-based reform movement, teacher educators need to do more than ask these questions; they must find the answers in order to provide a context and framework for their teacher education programs. Hence, this article will discuss how an advanced level teacher education department containing programs in reading, special education and counseling within a large public urban university set out to construct a "pedagogy of possibility" using a Learning Circle Model to reflect on the multiple cultures, multiple voices and multiple realities underlying its programs.

The implementation of the Learning Circle Model was intended to cover a two-year period of self-study, as an active research opportunity. The Learning Circle provided a forum for faculty from different disciplines to examine their differences and discover their commonalities. Its methodology involved a series of discussions based on a common set of readings, exploring contemporary issues of social theory and educational practice. The reading list was extensive and

included writings by postmodern, feminist, chaos and complexity theorists. How such theorists might be employed in developing a critical pedagogy served as a major focus of the department=s discussion. Readings (see Table 1) were suggested by faculty members and a calendar of meetings around these readings was developed. To enrich the conversations at these meetings, the Learning Circle was open to faculty and administrators outside the department, who could bring interpretations of the readings from their different disciplines.

The Learning Circle inspired reflective thinking among faculty regarding their purposes, privileges, and responsibilities as members of a multidisciplinary department. By assessing the premises and values that comprise each individual department member's ideological orientation as teacher, learner, researcher, theorist, and practitioner, the department was better able to address the pedagogical challenges that teacher education reform presented.

Through weekly Learning Circle meetings, not only did the mission of the department become clearer, and a more unified professional identity emerged. This identity was created out of the connection faculty made with each other in establishing an intellectual community, where teaching was viewed as community property. What were the expectancies concerning knowledge, values, and attitudes that the faculty had for students enrolled in their graduate programs? Were the experiences faculty provided for students sufficient to meet those expectancies? In this context, underlying assumptions about students and the courses offered in the department could be examined and challenged. Through readings on multiculturalism and diversity, the importance of providing students with frequent opportunities to tell their stories emerged as necessary for faculty to incorporate in the curricula in order to validate personal experience as a context for learning. Students telling their stories sensitized prospective teachers to the richness that

multiculturalism can bring to the classroom and modeled ways in which diversity and difference could be valued. Faculty examined the knowledge base in their respective disciplines in order to question assumptions about teaching diverse children in urban settings and what teachers should come to know as a result of their study and active participation in graduate programs. Through the process of contextualizing knowledge, faculty examined research paradigms and whether they conformed to traditional and linear modes of inquiry, modes typically valued by the academy. They questioned to what extent those traditional paradigms in fact limited possibilities for research because of underlying faulty assumptions. Alternative paradigms to traditional and linear modes of inquiry were evaluated in terms of their underlying assumptions and their utility for future research.

The Learning Circle Model lies at the heart of the idea of inventing community and articulating possibility. This process enabled individual faculty members to plan for the implementation of significant changes in their teaching. As a result, shifts in pedagogic form to emphasize the place of dialogue and to validate personal experience as a source of knowledge and values emerged. Curricula were revised to be more inclusive of the multiple realities inherent in an urban multicultural environment. Over time, the "good talk about good teaching" (Palmer, 1993) promoted change in the professional identities of faculty in the department, in their teaching and in their varied research agendas.

Toward a "Pedagogy of Possibility"

In exploring critical perspectives in teacher education, the members of the Learning Circle began to embrace a "pedagogy of possibility." This pedagogy is based on the following themes that emerged from the Learning Circle conversations:

- the need to explore the faculty's disciplines in the department through an ongoing collective inquiry in teaching and research, theory and practice, and school and community;
- the necessity for preparing teachers and counselors who know how to give voice to students whose divergent voices traditionally have been silenced in schools;
- the construction of specific practices and the implementation of standards that that research maintains will lead to successful academic achievement for graduate students and the children they will serve.
- the recognition that new departmental courses in contemporary issues in urban education were needed;
- the critique of norms, criteria, assessment, and linear evaluative processes which limit the expression of diversity, development, and difference within educational theory and practice;
- the study of how research methods establish specific social relations and how research is positioned in ideological value and intentionality;
- the recognition that the emergence of various divergent practices develop explicit research programs that work in the interests of equity and social justice for a rapidly changing, multicultural society;
- the need for research to address collaboration and synergy among teachers, researchers, students, and contexts of inquiry on multiple forms of cultural memory and regeneration;

- the need to examine the unequal recognition of forms of knowledge including the narrative, autobiographical, rhetorical, and dramatic expression;
- the possibilities of providing space for collaborative inquiry, teaching, criticism, critical engagement, and interpretive and reflective practices among faculty;
- the dissemination of the knowledge base derived from the readings to teachers, counselors, principals and other school personnel with whom departmental faculty work;
- the design of collaborative projects across programs by which the department could strengthen connections to community-based organizations through initiatives in adult education, family literacy, parent advocacy, counseling and professional consultation.

In conclusion, the conversations of the Learning Circle provided the impetus for the department to articulate a "pedagogy of possibility", which informed the development of an overarching conceptual framework to guide its newly revised teacher and counselor education programs. Through the "pedagogy of possibility", the department members came together to explore the multiple cultures, multiple voices and multiple realities that underlie its teacher and counselor education programs in order to retool them for the 21st century.

TABLE 1

Learning Circle Readings

Learning Circle Meeting 1

Cornbleth, C. (1992). The great speckled bird: Education policy-in-the-making. Educational Researcher, 23, 31-37.

Learning Circle Meeting 2

Giroux, H. (1988). Teachers as intellectuals. New York, NY: Bergin & Garvey. .

Ogbu, J. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. Educational Researcher, 24, 5-14.

Tyack, D. (1993). Constructing difference: Historical reflections on schooling and social diversity. Teachers College Record, 95(1), 8-34.

Learning Circle Meeting 3

Pugh, C. & Donleavy, N. (1988). Collaboration through validation of difference: An interracial model for change. In Herma B.Williams (Ed.), Empowerment through differences and multicultural awareness through differences. Eighth Annual Yearbook of the Teacher Education Section of the American Home Economics Association. Peoria, IL: Bennett and McKnight, pp. 3-27.

Futrell, M. (1993). To seize the challenge of change: American education and the 21st CenturyCWhat future for education? Paper presented at Lehman College, The City University of New York, Bronx, New York, November 3, 1993.

Walsh, K. (1991). Preface. Pedagogy and the struggle for voice. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, pp. 31-64.

Learning Circle Meeting 4

Walsh, K. (1991). Introduction to the series. Pedagogy and the struggle for voice. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, pp. 65-94.

Kazemek, F. (1988). Necessary changes: Professional involvement in adult literacy programs. Harvard Educational Review, 58(4), 464-487.

Laird, S. (1988). Reforming woman's true profession: A case for feminist pedagogy in teacher education. Harvard Educational Review, 58(4), 449-463.

Learning Circle Meeting 5

Palmer, P.J. (1993). Good talk about good teaching. Change, Nov.-Dec., 14-21.

Shulman, L. (1993). Teaching as community property. Change, Nov.-Dec., 6-12.

Learning Circle Meeting 6

Takaki, R. (1993). A different mirror. Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company.

Learning Circle Meeting 7

Kincheloe, J.L. (1993). Reframing the debate about teacher education. Toward a critical politics of teacher thinking. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp. 196-231.

Learning Circle Meeting 8

Shannon, P. (1993). Voice and power in teaching and learning to teach: Developing democratic voices. The Reading Teacher, 47(2), 86-94.

Valli, L. (1992). Feminist pedagogy as a foundation for reflective teacher education programs. Reflective teacher education: Cases and critiques. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 175-186.

Learning Circle Meeting 10

Kincheloe, J.L. (1993). Preparing the post-formal practitioner. Toward a critical politics of teacher thinking. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp. 233-246.

Learning Circle Meeting 11

Lather, P. (1986). Research as praxis. Harvard Educational Review, 56(3), 257-277.

Learning Circle Meeting 12

Grumet, M. (1990). Retrospective: Autobiography and the analysis of educational experience. Cambridge Journal of Education, 20(3), 321-325.

Grumet, M. (1987). The politics of personal knowledge. Curriculum Inquiry, 17(3), 319-329.

Learning Circle Meeting 13

Valsiner, J. (1987). Culture and the development of childen's action. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Winegar, L.T., & Valsiner, J. (1992). Children's development within social context. Metatheory and Theory. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 1-14.

Learning Circle Meeting 14

Chodorow, N. (1979). Feminism and difference: Gender relation, and difference in psychoanalytic perspective. Socialist Review, 46(24), 51-69.

Tucker, S. (1994). Chaos, theory and complexity: Applications for nonlinear assessment. Paper presented at American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Chicago, IL: February 18, 1994.

Learning Circle Meeting 15

Anderson, G. (1989). Critical ethnography in education: Origins, current status, and new directions. Review of Educational Research, 59(3), 249-270.

Crowell, S. (1986). A new way of thinking: The challenge of the future. Educational Leadership, 47(1), 60-63.

Doll, W.E. (1989). Complexity in the classroom. Educational Leadership, 47(1), 65-70.

Taylor, O. & Metsuda, M. (1988). Storytelling and classroom discrimination In Smitherman & Donalson (Eds.), Discourse and Discrimination. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, pp. 206-220.

Learning Circle Meeting 16

Valsiner, J. (1987). Culture and the development of childen's action. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Winegar, L.T. & Valsiner, J. (1992). Children's development within social context. Metatheory and Theory. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 1-14.

Learning Circle Meeting 17

Kincheloe, J.L. (1993). Contextualizing cognitive development and the nature of post-formal thinking. Toward a critical politics of teacher education. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp. 125-144.

Kincheloe, J.L. (1993). The nature of post-formal thinking. Toward a critical politics of teacher education. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp. 145-173.

Learning Circle Meeting 18

Kincheloe, J.L. (1993). The politics of thinking. Toward a critical politics of teacher education. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp. 39-58.

Kincheloe, J.L. (1993). Critical Constructivism. Toward a critical politics of teacher education. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, pp. 107-124.

Learning Circle Meeting 19

Wertsch, L.V. (1986). Voices of the mind. Working papers and proceedings of the Center for Psychosocial Studies. Chicago: Center for Psychosocial Studies, Paper No. 1.

Volosinov, V.N. (1986). The study of ideologues and philosophy of language. Marxism and the philosophy of language, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 9-15.

Learning Circle Meeting 20

Tomkins, J. (1990). Pedagogy of the distressed. College English, 52(6), 653-660.

Anyon, J. (1994). The retreat of marxism and socialist feminism: Postmodern and poststructural theories of education. Curriculum Inquiry, 29(2), 115-133.

Learning Circle Meeting 21

Walker, S.K. (1994). Canonical gestures. Curriculum Inquiry, 24(2), 171-180.

Lather, P. (1994). Dada practices: A feminist reading. Curriculum Inquiry, 24(2), 181-187.

Learning Circle Meeting 22

Cherryholmes, C.H. (1994). Pragmatism, poststructuralism, and socially useful theorizing. Curriculum Inquiry, 24(2), 193-213.

Learning Circle Meeting 23

Traub, J. (1994). City on a hill. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Walker, S.K. (1994). Furthered thoughts. Curriculum Inquiry, 24(2),189-191.

Learning Circle Meeting 24

Herrnstein, R.J., & Murray, C. (1994). The bell curve. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Learning Circle Meeting 25

Browne, M.C. (1994). What is intelligence, and who has it? New York Times Book Review.

Coughlin, E. (1995). Intelligence researchers issue statement on `Mainstream Science=. The Chronicle on Higher Education, January 6, 1995.

DeParle, J. (1994). Daring research or `social science pornography.' New York Times Magazine, October 9, 1994.

Gould, S.J. (1994). Curveball. The New Yorker, November 28, 1994.

Learning Circle Meeting 26

Hacking, I. (1995). Pull the other one. London Review of Books, January 26, 1995, 3-5.

Hirsch, J. (1963). Behavior, genetics and individuality understood. Science, December 13, 1963, 1436-1442.

Holmes, S. (1994). You're smart if you know what race you are. New York Times News of The Week in Review, October 23, 1994, 8.

Hudson, L. (1994). The wretched connection. Times Literary Supplement, December 2, 1994, 5-6.

Johnson, G. (1994). Learning just how little is known about the brain. The New York Times News of the Week in Review, October 23, 1994, 7.

Learning Circle Meeting 27

Kamin, L.J. (1995). Behind the curve. Scientific American, February, 1995, 99-103.

Lacayo, R. (1994). For whom the bell curves. Time, October 24, 1994, 66-67.

Lane, C. (1994). The tainted sources of 'The Bell Curve'. New York Review, December 1, 1994, 14-16.

Maschinot, B. (1995). Behind the curve. In These Times, February 6, 1995, 31-34.

Learning Circle Meeting 28

Morin, R. (1995). The data that formed 'The Bell Curve=. The Washington Post Weekly, January 16-22, 1995, 37.

Ryan, A. (1994). Apocalypse now? New York Review, November 17, 1994, 6-10.

Tannenbaum, L. (1995). Gene fools. In These Times, February 6, 1995, 14-17.

Winship, C. (1994). Lessons beyond 'The Bell Curve'. New York Times, November 15, 1994, 8.